

WINGATE, ORWELL, AND THE "JEWISH QUESTION"

A Memoir

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WHILE reading and pondering over some recent essays in COMMENTARY on Jewish "authenticity" (and the relation between Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals), I found my thoughts taking me back to the memory of two English friends with whom chance had brought me into early contact, and whose like I shall hardly encounter again.

Both friends were actually of Scottish descent, but preferred to regard themselves as English. The first was Orde Wingate—the late Major General O. C. Wingate. I believe that Wingate's name is not widely known in the United States. The war theaters across which he marched—Abyssinia and Burma—were not of first interest to American readers. Nor is Orde Wingate's name sufficiently known among American Jews, though he was for some years intimately connected with Jewish Palestine; and indeed the consequences of this connection have had a far-reaching effect on the present Jewish situation and, one might perhaps even say, on the contemporary Jewish outlook.

Wingate was one of the few men of authentic military genius thrown up by a war of machines. Early death cut short his extraordinary career, yet he had already done enough to show himself in the tradition of

those brilliant, youthful British upper-class soldiers of one hundred fifty to two hundred years earlier—Clive, Wolfe, Nelson, Wellington, and the rest—whose victories brought it about that English is today the language of North America, that the 19th century was dominated by the *Pax Britannica*, that the independent India of today, with its 250 million citizens, is a member of a Commonwealth headed by a small island nation off the west of Europe. When Wingate died, in 1944, Winston Churchill (and he should know!) said of him in Parliament that he was "a man of genius, who might also have become a man of destiny."

Wingate had no time to become a man of destiny. Yet, briefly, consider his career.

HE was born in India, in 1903. He came from a well-known family of professional soldiers. His father was an Indian Army career officer, who, however, retired to devote himself to the organization of missionary work in Central Asia. (Orde Wingate, incidentally, was a distant relative of Lawrence of Arabia.) As a young subaltern, Wingate was sent in the 1930's to the Middle East, which laid its spell on him as it had done on so many Englishmen. He learned to speak Arabic, and if necessary, to live like an Arab. He organized a romantic expedition in search of a lost oasis; he went on long, solitary desert rides, quoting aloud to himself Wordsworth or Marlowe by the hour; he wrote papers on desert warfare which were so highly original that the British military disregarded them until Rommel had actually appeared in the western desert; and finally, during Mussolini's conquest of Abyssinia, which inspired him with anger and disgust, he served on the Sudan-Abyssinian frontier. In 1937 he was posted to Palestine, where the anti-Jewish Arab dis-

T. R. FYVEL here relates some memories of two of his friends, the late General Orde Wingate and the late novelist George Orwell—men seemingly very different from one another, and yet with much in common, including a fascination with the Jewish revival of recent years—and speculates on what it was that so deeply caught the imagination of these two Englishmen. Mr. Fyvel has been for many years literary editor of the *London Tribune*, and is the author of *The Malady and the Vision; an Analysis of Political Faith* (1941).

turbances, led by the Mufti of Jerusalem, had been in progress for a year, half winked at by the British administration.

When he arrived in Palestine, as an Intelligence officer on General Wavell's staff, a large British force had been fighting the Arab bands with the customary inefficiency of a regular army chasing guerrillas. But it was also fighting them half-heartedly: the British government officials in Palestine, almost to a man on the Arab side, were often doing their best to hamstring the Jewish settlers' self-defense. Wingate—he then had the rank of captain—saw through this situation at once. Taking sides passionately, he persuaded the authorities to let him organize a "night squads" force consisting of about three hundred Palestine Jews and a handful of British soldiers and NCO's. He had studied the tactics of the Arab bands and knew exactly what he was about. Marching at the head of his small counter-guerrilla force, he cleared the whole north of Palestine of Arab bands with ludicrous ease.

For this, he earned his DSO, a high British military decoration in peacetime—and also the enmity of the Palestine British officials whose pro-Arab code he had so successfully transgressed. The machine moved: Captain Wingate was sent back to London where he had to kick his heels for the whole first year of the war, in command of an anti-aircraft battery. It took the collapse of France to lift the British Middle East ban against him. He had been demanding to be placed in command of Palestine Jewish forces. That was not to be: but as a second best assignment he was sent to carry guerrilla war into Italian-occupied Abyssinia. Once again he demonstrated his consummate military talents. Marching like a vengeful military genius at the head of his "Gideon Force" of two hundred British soldiers and a few thousand Abyssinian irregulars, he destroyed an Italian colonial army of 36,000 men. But once again, by marching with the Emperor Haile Selassie at his side straight to Addis Ababa, he had transgressed political instructions—there was apparently a powerful intrigue against the Emperor at GHQ, Cairo.

This time, his conflict with the authorities was brought to the point of violent crisis. By the summer of 1941, Wingate was back in London once more, in disgrace.

Then in December came the Japanese attack, and the first British military disasters in Malaya. Through Churchill's personal intervention, Wingate was flown out to India. There, at first given no regular command, he organized his famous "Chindits"—small British forces to operate behind the Japanese lines. Led by a now bearded Brigadier Wingate, the Chindits set out into Burma; for weeks they roamed behind the Japanese lines; they did untold damage; they returned. This time, Wingate's military gifts were so obvious that his triumph was complete. Raised to major general, he was flown back to London, and there snatched up by Churchill and taken at a day's notice to the Quebec Conference, where he met and impressed President Roosevelt and General Marshall. Both British and American resources were for the first time put at his disposal. Together with bolder spirits in the US Air Forces, men after his own heart, he made plans for land-air operations behind the Japanese in Burma on an entirely new scale; whole units were to be flown in, entirely air-supplied strongholds set up, clumsy land warfare was to be entirely by-passed. But the combined operation had only just been successfully started when the American B-25 in which he was traveling struck a mountainside in Burma, and he was killed, at the early age of forty, on the threshold of fame.

ATEMPESTUOUS, a passionate career, in the tradition of the great English rebels. In England it has already become the Wingate legend. But I am concerned here with Wingate and Palestine. And when I met him in Jerusalem in 1938, the legend was still years in the future.

It was in the first days of the year, I remember. I had been told that a Captain Wingate was newly arrived—an odd fish, because though he was an Intelligence staff officer, both he and his wife were passion-

ately pro-Zionist. Our first meeting was at some Jewish notable's tea party, where there were also a few official British guests. I saw a young officer, fair-haired, with piercing blue eyes, and a somewhat wolfish twist to his mouth that was at the same time humorous and gave an impression of contained power and careless eccentricity. I had just come from London, and at once he engaged me in conversation on every conceivable political topic, plainly using me as sounding board for the views and thoughts which he threw out. For the next years this was the basis of our relationship—ceaseless discussion.

Some of his views were daringly unorthodox. During this first conversation Wingate told me, for example, how he had arrived in Palestine not long before on a troop convoy. On the way he had lectured the officers on the Arabs. The gist of his talk had been something like this: "Your Arab is a likeable fellow, more cultured than he appears, but the world's worst soldier." No one had contradicted; yet, Wingate said, his attack on the long-standing British legend of the Arabs as devilish fighters had simply not had the slightest impact on the assembled British officers. They had not learned—as yet, he said.

I remember another day with him in Jerusalem, in March 1938, a few days after Hitler had entered Vienna, and when, as a Reuters message had reported, Austrian Jews were being "herded through the streets of Vienna like cattle." He was taking me with him by car on a brief tour of inspection into Transjordan and back. On the return journey, I remember, we stopped at the frontier at the well-known "Allenby Bridge" across the Jordan, not far from Jericho, and walked for a while alongside the banks of the river. I remember the sedge was growing very tall.

BECAUSE of Vienna, neither of us was in too good a mood. Orde Wingate held forth in scathing terms about the Chamberlain government's policy of appeasement of Mussolini in Africa, of the Japanese over the Chinese war, and of the feudal Arab kings in the Middle East. So far, these were the

left-wing views to which I was well accustomed. But soon Wingate departed into his own unorthodoxy. The Foreign Office and the War Office, he said, were determined to crush Zionism by hook or crook. The Palestine Jews should therefore know that sooner or later they would have to fight the Arabs—even if the British shamefully armed and backed the Arabs, he added bitterly.

Now, at that time, 1938, I had heard such warlike views expressed only from the less respectable and wildcat Zionist fringe. To hear them solemnly announced by a British officer was pretty staggering. But Wingate impressed me no less when he began to talk about the coming world war and its shape. Hitler would strike within a year, he thought. The small European countries were already irrelevant. France would collapse—the French army, he said confidently, was not going to fight. Only Britain would be left, defending its island fortress—there Hitler would be brought up short—and clinging on for dear life in the Middle East, the key: for if the Middle East could be held, the land-locked Axis could not break out of Europe, and the Americans, the Russians, everybody, could then pile in to crush the Nazis and Fascists. All that, he said, was perfectly clear. But in the defense of the Middle East, Egypt would probably be lost. The holding of Palestine was therefore the key to the defense of the Middle East. That was why it was so important that the Palestine Jews should be armed and trained. He, Orde Wingate, had thought it all out.

Seen in retrospect, this military analysis appears profoundly prophetic. Where Wingate erred was only in underestimating the inefficiency of the Italian army poised for the attack on Egypt. At the time when I was listening to him, Wingate's words seemed to me partly fantastic, yet partly I was already beginning to fall under his spell. And, as we went along the banks of the Jordan, he went on talking. Since war was coming, he had already decided that there must, among others, be three outstanding British war aims: the liberation of Abyssinia from the Italians, of China from the Japanese, and

the unqualified fulfillment of the Balfour Declaration! And he, Captain Orde Wingate, had already determined to work his hardest to see that these British war aims were carried out.

One must remember: Wingate was at that time only a junior British officer in his early thirties, and this was spring 1938, with British appeasement of Hitler (and of the Arabs) still in full spate. And I was a fairly skeptical person. How seriously did I take his views at the time? Across the gulf of twelve years, it is not easy to say, yet I am sure I was at least half converted, like so many of those who in the astonishing years that followed fell under the spell of his personality. And though no one, not even a Wingate, can really plan the future, he did in spite of setbacks and terrible personal defeats play a part in furthering his war aims: in 1938, in his Palestine "Night Squads," he turned an elite of youthful Palmach soldiers into artists in guerrilla warfare; in 1941, he rode on a white horse behind the Emperor of Abyssinia through the streets of Addis Ababa, the liberated capital; and in his Burmese campaigns of 1943-4 he was the first British commander to link up with Chinese troops against the Japanese. From our extraordinary conversation on the banks of the Jordan till the end that cut him off before his time, there was a clear pattern to his life, the pattern of a man with an unswerving mission.

WHEN Wingate came to Palestine in 1938, two traditions met—and fused. His was the tradition of "Bible and sword," already old in English history. But, paradoxically, for the Jewish settlers "Bible and sword" was a new tradition they had just acquired—which circumstances had forced on them.

Wingate's childhood experience had also played a decisive part in this fusion. As has been said, Wingate's father left the Indian army to devote himself to the organization of Christian missions. Both he and Wingate's mother belonged to the Plymouth Brethren, that sternest and most Puritan wing of English Protestantism. Their family life was at

the same time intense and happy, and dominated by an Old Testament Puritanism of self-search and prayer in which every action of every member of the family was judged in the light of "is it just, is it right?" And in a way, even Wingate's own famous military campaigns follow the pattern of a small group of the religious elite marching through regions of darkness—a recurring pattern: in his "Night Squads" of young Palestine Jews, in his "Gideon Force" (note the Biblical name) marching straight across Abyssinia, in his small compact groups of "Chindits" plunging into the Burmese jungle. Again, when Wingate arrived in Palestine, so well had his Protestant Old Testament training prepared him, that every hill and brook, as he said, seemed familiar. One of his favorite pastimes was an analysis on the spot of the battles of Gideon or Saul or David in the light of modern tactics. Given this "Bible and sword" background, it is not surprising that something in Wingate responded immediately to the sight of the Jewish settlements, small fortified islands among the Arab "Philistines," and that in his mind he fused their Biblical tradition and his own.

These psychological speculations are fascinating, but even more fascinating, and I have often thought about this, is the unquestionable fact that the brief flash of contact between this "Bible and sword" English soldier and Palestine has had a significant effect on the Jewish outlook. Much could still be written on this point. Put it merely like this: how many non-Jews have significantly affected Jewish life since the war? One might perhaps say Harry Truman, also a Bible-educated man, when through his personal intervention he destroyed the Foreign Office-State Department cabal against the State of Israel. (I always have a childish picture of Truman in 1948 bursting into a room full of his advisers, exclaiming: "I recognize Israel!" and disappearing again like a diving duck so that no one might be able to gainsay the declaration.) But if Truman (for whatever motives) provided the political shelter for the unexpected military effort of Israel, the intelligence, un-

orthodoxy, and audacity of that effort was notably shaped by the Wingate tradition.

It was not merely a matter of direct application of his principles of military strategy and tactics, though such successful Israeli commanders of 1948 as Moshe Dayan and Yigal Alon had ten years earlier, as youngsters, been trained by him as members of the "Night Squads." It was more than that: what Wingate did during his brief sojourn in Palestine in 1937-8 was to help awaken the Palestine Jews to the brutal realities of the world around them, and at the same time to infuse into their outlook something of his own fervent spirit—his complete faith in what he had decided was the just cause, together with his audacious contempt for the stupidity of military machines or for mere numbers, confidence in striking boldly and straight at the heart of the enemy; belief in daringly unorthodox strategy, and so forth. One could see all these qualities reflected in greater and lesser measure in the Israeli victories of 1948. To the extent that Orde Wingate was responsible for these victories, to the extent that they have created a new Jewish morale, surely to that extent has he subtly affected the outlook of Jews in and outside Israel, many of whom have never heard his name.

THE second friend of whom I wish to write (in a very different strain) bore in some outward respects a strange similarity to Orde Wingate. He was of the same age as Wingate; like him, born in India; like him, of Scots descent, yet identifying himself not with Scotland, but England. Like Wingate, too, he had a strong touch of the Puritan. Yet, how different he was in nature: where Wingate in action was the man of destiny, he was shy, awkward, and gentle. I met him first in 1940. His name was Eric Blair, though he was already becoming well known under his pen name, George Orwell.

In Palestine in 1938 I had read his volume of essays, *Inside the Whale*, and ever since had wanted to meet him. I remember our first encounter. It was in the summer of 1940, in the interval between the collapse of

France and the start of the Air Battle of Britain. We had been introduced by our joint publisher. In appearance Orwell was quite different from what his incisive writings had led me to expect. I saw an over-tall, thin man, dressed, as someone has said, rather like a seedy Sahib, with an intellectual and deeply lined face, and, until one knew him well, as awkward in personal manner as he was bold in the world of ideas. His voice was gentle and a little high-pitched, on account of a throat wound he had received when fighting for the Spanish Republicans in the ranks of the proscribed POUM, during the civil war. The small gathering where I met him had been called to discuss general ideas, but he seemed most anxious to discuss joining the newly formed Home Guard. And I remember that he turned to me and asked, "By the way, are you a Jew?"—putting the question abruptly, as though it was a rather awkward point.

Ten years later, I was to visit him frequently as he lay in bed in a private hospital room in London. By this time he was the author of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four*, with a world reputation, and also a desperately sick man. I have a vivid recollection of one of the occasions on which I came into his room. He was reclining in bed, with his face painfully thin, now wearing glasses, and reading *COMMENTARY*, to which he had several times contributed and which he read regularly.

But thereby hangs a tale, and in the intervening years there had been many meetings and conversations.

THE year 1940, when we first met, was Britain's *annus mirabilis*. Its summer, whose flavor hardly anyone who was not in these islands can fully appreciate, saw violent fluctuations of fortune: the fall of France, the miracle of Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain. It was a year in which anything seemed possible. Three of us, an odd trio, Orwell, an English writer, myself, a Jew, and Sebastian Haffner, a German anti-Nazi, decided to put out a series of small books on and around the war effort. The books duly

appeared—Orwell's own contribution was *The Lion and the Unicorn*—and served their modest purpose. The series stopped, as happens in such cases, when we were all called up for various kinds of war service. During this time, however, I saw a good deal of Orwell. He was among other things busily making the sort of social-cultural investigation of popular feelings that is given so much place in many of his essays, and among the subjects he "investigated" and which he talked about was one which never ceased to puzzle him: Jews.

There were two immediate reasons for his interest. First, he could just recall some minor anti-Semitic outbreaks in London during the First World War, and was worried, somewhat needlessly, that they might recur. Actually, as Orwell himself put it, it is possible for popular prejudices to be brought more into the limelight even while they are becoming less, and this, he concluded, was the case with anti-Semitism in England. A second reason was that because of the district in which he had taken a new flat, the Home Guard platoon he commanded as sergeant was composed almost entirely of middle-aged Jewish businessmen, some British-born, others naturalized, and both of a character and readiness to argue about politics which was quite new to him.

I discovered that Orwell had previously hardly met any Jews. He had known a few at Eton; they seemed to him to have been rich, and one assumed, he said, that they were slightly ashamed of being Jews. Otherwise he had only encountered a few odd Jewish shopkeepers. The references to Jews in his early novels had been the usual uncomplimentary stereotypes. As is obvious from his writings, Orwell was very much a divided personality. Emotionally he not only understood but partly still shared the outlook of the English upper-middle class, more precisely of the rather decayed levels of this upper-middle class, whose prejudices, and this includes anti-Semitism, are much sharper than those of its betters. On the other hand, as a writer, an intellectual, Orwell naturally rejected those prejudices out of hand—and

yet this conflict in him was never quite solved. At any rate, it is an interesting sidelight in English literary life that as late as 1940 Orwell was only just beginning to encounter "the Jewish question."

When I met him again after the war he had progressed considerably further in the question. The liberated concentration camps and other revelations on the Continent had, after all, brought the question into the foreground, and events in Palestine were also beginning to do so. Orwell himself had become a well-known political writer of the non-Communist left, and as such was frequently in the company of Jewish intellectuals. He was an internationalist, in favor of the ideal of United Europe; Arthur Koestler, among others, had become his close friend, and Orwell had written an unusually understanding essay in which he set Koestler's writings against their background of an uprooted Jewish literary life. But the whole question still puzzled and preoccupied him. I asked him on one occasion why, in his *Nineteen Eighty-four*, he had given the name "Alexander Goldstein" to the one conceivable rebel left against Big Brother and the Party. Orwell explained that partly his "Goldstein" was, of course, an obvious skit on Trotsky. But he said he also felt that the likely man to stage a hopeless last revolt against a possible totalitarian regime would be some Jewish intellectual.

ZIONISM, however, worried Orwell very much, especially when the shooting in Palestine began in 1946, and the Socialist weekly, *Tribune*, to which he contributed his regular literary articles, took up a strong and consistent anti-Bevin line. In many an argument I could sense his emotional conflict. On the one side were the political arguments put to him by Jewish or socialist colleagues and friends; on the other hand, it was British officials and officers, men of his own class, who were being shot at in Palestine. And so he was never quite convinced. He liked thinking in terms of startling paradoxes, and one of his worries was that "They" seemed almost unanimous in support of Zionism.

"They" to him were most of the intellectuals of the British left, especially certain liberal contributors to the *New Statesman* and *Manchester Guardian*; together with the fellow-traveler fringe on their left, "They" had become to him dangerous illusionists: "They" had in the 20's supported German demands for Allied evacuation of the Rhineland and Ruhr as a step towards world peace; "They" had in the 30's believed in Communism as merely advanced liberalism; "They" propagated the idea that the Indian Congress movement was genuinely democratic; and now, if "They" equally supported the Palestine Jews against the British government, wasn't that almost a sign that Zionism, too, had its militarist and fascist germ?

No, he wasn't happy about it. He told me on one occasion that he had had a heated argument with Arthur Koestler over *Thieves in the Night*, on the grounds that a writer like Koestler couldn't be internationalist in general and nationalist just in that one corner of the world. "You agree with me, don't you?" he said hopefully. I explained that though my views on Palestine politics differed markedly from Koestler's, in general I felt much as he did. And I tried to explain to Orwell: just as he with his strong English tradition felt deeply attached to some odd aspects of English life, so I had many Zionist family connections, I had my own Jewish tradition; all that inevitably shaped my sentiments about Palestine. "Yes, but . . ." said Orwell, looking at me doubtfully. I knew what this "but" meant. It meant that after all I had also been to an English school and university, I obviously also knew the English tradition; we had on so many occasions together discussed English topics—and yet, he had again come up against this puzzling question: to what extent is an "assimilated" Jewish intellectual still different, still a Jew?

IT WAS a question which never quite ceased to fascinate him. He often read Jewish journals or pamphlets. As I mentioned before, during the late period of his life, when he was lying in bed in hospital, I came in one evening to find him puzzling over an

issue of *COMMENTARY*. As I said, he read the journal regularly. One of its points of interest for him was the constant revelation how many of the American writers whose books he had read were in fact Jews. It seemed a surprising number. Take an American war novel like *The Young Lions*, he said: now Irwin Shaw was a Jew, wasn't he? Yes, he was, I said. And was Norman Mailer also a Jew? I wasn't absolutely certain, I said—no more than Orwell had I ever visited the United States—but from internal evidence in *The Naked and the Dead* there was almost no doubt.

As Orwell pondered about this, I put a theory of my own about contemporary war books. The Second World War, I said, had produced no great literature of revolt comparable to the first. There had been no real successors to Rolland, Barbusse, Dos Passos, Sassoon, Sitwell, Graves, or even Remarque. In fact, the only spark that seemed to have set off new war novels had been the experience of young Jewish intellectuals serving in the forces. It was interesting, I said, that the most successful English "straight" war novel, *From the City, From the Plough*, had been written by a young London Jew, Alexander Baron. The generalization was only roughly true, yet true enough to raise a point—though I did not quite know what conclusions to draw.

Orwell thought this over. But he returned to his issue of *COMMENTARY*. Why were all American Jews, he asked, so constantly absorbed in a definition of their Jewishness?

Good gracious, not all the four and a half million, I said: for instance, during the two years of the war I spent at various US Army headquarters I met plenty of tough Jewish enlisted men who neither wrote war novels, nor worried over "authenticity" nor, probably, had even heard of a journal on the level of *COMMENTARY*. The point at issue, I thought, was one Orwell had often made himself: that to find a living relationship with modern machine-dominated societies was the most difficult problem for writers and intellectuals of today. For intellectual Jews this problem was not basically differ-

ent, but only just that much more difficult and complicated.

I think we left the discussion at this point, with Orwell still puzzled.

SINCE I began these somewhat disjointed reminiscences of two friends, with whom chance had thrown me into contact, by introducing the question of personal relations between Jews and non-Jews, have I any general conclusions to add? I think the point most worth stressing is that both Wingate and Orwell were of course not only exceptional men but were steeped in national tradition. And I think the whole problem of such personal relations between Jews and non-Jews (outside Israel, of course) depends on the creation of what might be called "a contemporary Jewish tradition"—as the other side of the equation.

What I mean by this word "tradition" may well also be called "way of life." Beyond this it is not easy to define. It is far easier to define what I feel this tradition or way of life

is *not*. It is neither identical with frightened and undignified assimilation, nor with artificially stressed attempts to be a "nationally positive" Jew; neither with Jewish self-hatred nor yet with a sentimentalized approach to a folklorist Jewish past or crude boasts about the number of famous Jews. Yet the contemporary Jewish tradition would include elements of all these; assimilation of Western culture, together with acceptance without question of being Jewish, reasonable self-criticism, and legitimate interest in Jewish achievement. Such a tradition, I know, sounds easy to describe, and is infinitely difficult to achieve. Perhaps most difficult of all in the United States: how create a limited deviation from an American national tradition, when this national tradition is itself still in a state of flux? And yet I feel the solution, I won't say of the Jewish problem but of a Jewish way of life, lies in this direction; and the writers whom Orwell and I had been reading are, I feel sure, engaged in seeking, and helping shape, that way.